



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2010 – Ranching on the Tallgrass Prairie (Marty White, Editor)

Cattle in the Flint Hills: The Texas – Kansas Connection

Jim Hoy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

Recommended Citation

Hoy, Jim (2010). "Cattle in the Flint Hills: The Texas – Kansas Connection," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2010/flinthills/2>

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Cattle in the Flint Hills: The Texas – Kansas Connection

The cattle industry of the Flint Hills had its origin along the Rio Grande River nearly four centuries ago. Even today, as they did in my boyhood, many of the summer cattle that graze Flint Hills bluestem come from the brush country of south Texas, and some from below the Rio Grande in Old Mexico.



Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the government of New Spain encouraged settlement in its northeastern regions, partly to prevent encroachment by the French, the English, or, later, the Americans. This settlement went hand-in-hand with the efforts of the Catholic Church to convert the native inhabitants. Just as the Church would send livestock with the clergy who established missions on the frontier, so the government would send livestock to accompany the secular settlements. By

the early nineteenth century the brush country between the Rio Grande and the Nueces Rivers had become populated with both people and cattle.

In 1821 the citizens of New Spain rebelled against their European rulers and established their own country, Mexico. This newly established government continued to encourage settlers to the region, although now most of the settlers came not from south of the Rio Grande but from east of the Mississippi. The American settlers



The Kansas State Historical Society

rebelled against the Mexican government in 1836 and created the Republic of Texas. In line with the old adage of victors and spoils, and with little regard for legality, the new Texans appropriated the land and cattle between the Nueces and the Rio Grande.

Thus was the Texas—and the Great Plains—cattle industry born. In the ensuing decades Texans would push the cattle frontier farther west, from the brushy country of southeast Texas out onto the semi-arid plains, the range of

the buffalo and the hunting grounds of the Comanche and Kiowa. That westward push was sporadic, often retreating then venturing out again, until the mid-1870s when the Southern Plains tribes were conquered and placed on reservations.

In the later years of the Republic and the earlier years of statehood (1845) Texas cattle were marketed as much for hides and tallow as for beef. But with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, Texans began to drive cattle across the



The Kansas State Historical Society

southern deserts to California. During the decade of the 1850s Texas cattle were also driven up the Shawnee Trail through the eastern part of Indian Territory, southeast Kansas, and Missouri, eventually to reach eastern markets.

This trade was cut off with the outbreak of the Civil War, and Texas ranchers had virtually no market for their cattle and few hands to look after them. To the north of Texas was Indian Territory, where the five Civilized Tribes had their own cattle industry and didn't

need any from Texas. North of them was Kansas, a free state. West of Texas was New Mexico, under Federal control. South was Mexico, which had cattle of its own. To the east was the Confederacy, but access to that market was greatly hampered by Union blockades in the Gulf of Mexico and military conflicts along the Mississippi River. As a result the number of Texas cattle increased rapidly during the War, with only a small number being marketed.

After the conflict cattle were so



The Kansas State Historical Society

numerous in Texas that, according to Joseph McCoy, who in 1867 established Abilene as the prototypical cowtown, a Texas rancher's wealth was determined by the number of cattle he owned—the more cattle, the poorer the man. But that market-ready steer that cost \$2 in Texas could bring up to \$40 in Chicago. With that astronomical profit potential looming, it didn't take long for ranchers to put together large herds and start north.

In 1866, those herds headed up the Shawnee Trail to Sedalia, Missouri, but fear of Texas Fever caused the Missouri

Legislature to ban Texas longhorns from entering the state, while Missouri farmers threatened the Texas drovers with guns and warned them never to come back.

And they didn't. The following year Joe McCoy convinced railroad officials to let him build some stock pens at the little village of Abilene, just west of the Flint Hills. In early September the first carload of Texas cattle left Abilene, and within two months over 30,000 head had been shipped. Over the next five years a million head of cattle would be shipped from Abilene. McCoy unintentionally

helped to create the American cowboy, who was born in the dust of the Old Chisholm Trail. All across the world men on horseback for centuries had been looking after livestock, but not until the great Texas-to-Kansas trail drives did the cowboy, with his distinctive high-crowned felt hat and his high-heeled boots, emerge from obscurity to become America's great folk hero.

The real-life cowboy, however, was just a hired man on horseback, and daily life on the Chisholm Trail ranged from excruciating boredom to potentially fatal danger from stampedes, Indians and rustlers, and swimming cattle across flooded rivers. A typical trail drive would start in Texas when a group of small farmers and ranchers might combine their cattle or when a big operator might have more than a dozen herds on the trail each season.

A typical trail herd numbered between 2,000 and 3,000 cattle. Sometimes those cattle were all steers to be marketed, sometimes they were

cows for stocking northern ranges, and sometimes they were mixed. Along with the cattle would be a well provisioned chuck wagon and a remuda of several score of horses. Ten drovers, a trail boss, a horse wrangler, and a cook made up the standard crew. The outfit would start north, driving hard the first couple of days in order to get the cattle used to the trail and also to get

In early September the first carload of Texas cattle left Abilene, and within two months over 30,000 head had been shipped.

them far from their home range because Texas longhorns have a strong homing instinct, part of their equally strong survival instinct.

Descended from cattle that had crossed the Atlantic with Spanish explorers in the 1500s, "Texas cattle," as the longhorns were called, had evolved

into a rangy animal far different from the blocky “American cattle” found in the northern and eastern states. For centuries the longhorn had survived weather and drouth, scant feed and fever ticks, not to mention wolves, bears, and mountain lions.

Soon after the trail drives began, Texas cattlemen discovered the virtues of Flint Hills grass: big and little bluestem, Indian grass, and switchgrass.

After the first couple of days on the trail, the pace slowed considerably, averaging around eight or ten miles a day. While in camp at night, two cowboys at a time would circle the cattle to keep them quiet, singing to them once it grew dark. The day began before dawn when the trail boss roused the cook, who in turn roused the horse wrangler. While the cook prepared bacon, sour-dough

biscuits, and Arbuckles coffee, the wrangler gathered the saddle horses and the chuck wagon mules. After breakfast, the trail boss roped out the day’s saddle horses, the drovers topped them off, then relieved the night guard. The cattle then would be thrown onto the trail and the drive would continue.

Moving eight miles a day with cattle that could, if pressed, go five times that distance, allowed them time to graze as they went along. Ten hours in camp each night let them rest and chew their cud, digesting the grass they had eaten during the day. With decent luck, a herd of cattle would walk hundreds of miles to Abilene and weigh more when they got there than when they had left Texas.

As early as 1856, a decade before the trail drives, cattle were being grazed on what is now the Chase-Butler county line south of Wonsevu (about ten miles south of the site of this year’s Symphony in the Flint Hills). Soon after the trail drives began, Texas cattlemen discovered the virtues of Flint Hills



The Kansas State Historical Society

grass: big and little bluestem, Indian grass, and switchgrass. Longhorns reaching Kansas were often grazed in the Flint Hills before being shipped out of Abilene, Newton, or Wichita. In 1868 Texas longhorns were being pastured along Fall River in Greenwood County. In the mid-1870s four residents of Greenwood City bought 3,000 longhorn steers and trailed them to Greenwood County. In the 1880s the 90,000-acre 101 Ranch was established in northwest Chase County. The British owners of

this ranch also had a million acres in the Texas Panhandle. Steers from the Southwest would be brought to Hymer each summer to graze on Flint Hills grass, then be shipped to market or fed on corn raised along Diamond Creek.

By the time the trail drives ended, around 1890, the profitable pattern of Texas steers summering in the Flint Hills was well established. Until the 1960s, steers, usually from two to four years old, would leave Texas by train in mid to late April, arriving in the Flint Hills after the



The Kansas State Historical Society

pastures had been burned and the new growth of grass had turned the blackened pastures green. After unloading in stockyards at such shipping points as Grand Summit, Virgil, Cassoday, Matfield Green, Bazaar, and Volland, they would be driven to their summer homes. By mid July shipping to market would begin, with only a few carloads at a time of the fattest steers taken from a pasture. (A stock car that had contained 45 steers in the spring might hold only 25 at shipping time, they had gained so much weight.) That process would

be repeated several times until by mid October, the end of pasture season, all the cattle would be gone.

As trucks replaced railroad shipping during the 1960s and early 1970s, yearlings replaced older cattle, Angus and exotic crosses replaced Brahmas and Herefords, and cattle from many other states joined those from Texas in Flint Hills pastures. Still, the Texas connection remains strong. Throughout the years many Texans have owned ranches in both Texas and the Flint Hills, just as many Kansas

ranchers have operated in both states. In the early twentieth century, the Crocker Brothers, Ed and Arthur, for instance, had their headquarters in Chase County at Matfield Green, but they also had ranches in Texas and Arizona. Later on Mason Crocker divided his time between Matfield Green and his ranch in Texas.

Another Chase County ranching family, the Crofoots, also had sizeable holdings in the Texas Panhandle, as did the Price family of Lyon County. The late Walter and Evan Jones of the Emporia and Lebo area operated extensively in both the Flint Hills and in the Texas panhandle.

From my younger years helping to ship Texas steers from the Cassoday stockyards, I remember particularly Jake Jordan, foreman for Welder and McCann, whose ranch was located near Victoria in south Texas. I also remember seeing Dolph Briscoe, Jr., of Uvalde many times at the Cassoday stockyards, several years before he was

elected governor of Texas. Another Texan who did extensive business in the Flint Hills was Emmett Lefors of Pampa, well known for the high quality of his Hereford bulls. The South Clements Pasture, in which this year's Symphony in the Flint Hills is being held, was originally owned by the late Charles Lipps of San Antonio, who had large holdings in the Flint Hills, particularly in Chase County. Today this pasture, owned by Texan Ed Bass, is part of an extensive Flint Hills operation.

Obviously, the Texas-Flint Hills cattle connection remains strong in 2010, maintaining a tradition that began in the days of the Old Chisholm Trail and will continue for as long as Kansas has grass and Texas has cows.

*Jim Hoy, Center for Great Plains Studies,
Emporia State University.*

Editor's note: Illustrations are from the June 1892 issue of Scribner's Magazine. They accompanied an article very much like this one by Jim Hoy. The significant and ironic difference was that the author concluded the lifestyle of the cowboy was disappearing. Almost 120 years later, that theory has fortunately been disproven. The cowboy is alive and well, not only in the Flint Hills, but across our great country.